

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: Artfulness blends with science in 'Silent Sky' in Door County

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FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV)

Science meets art meets faith.

Work meets family meets conflict.

Toil meets tedium meets discovery.

These all are in "Silent Sky," a graceful play about, of all things, the universe.

A Peninsula Players Theatre production continuing to Sept. 1 has a certain grace to it, too. Original music is subtly applied. Scene changes are a kind of ballet. And the acting is exacting, as is science.

The story in 25 words: Sky-minded, pragmatic Henrietta Leavitt joins women "computers" at Harvard Observatory and finds an answer for the ages while leaving open questions of heart and family.



Cassandra Bissell and Neil Brookshire
Photos by Len Villano

This is a true story, artfully applied by playwright Lauren Gunderson and the theatrical expertise of Peninsula Players Theatre. Wednesday's opening-night performance received a standing ovation, with a few cheers. The real Henrietta Leavitt may have blown that off as too emotional. Her sister, Margaret, may have wept. In the play, Henrietta and Margaret are different in their views of what "heaven" means. Margaret's has a God, Henrietta's has stars, endless stars. This difference means, of course, minds in the audience are thrown into a haunting question: Who's right?



Ashley Lanyon and Cassandra Bissell

This play is engaging that way.

The story is from life. It spans 1900 to 1920. Henrietta Leavitt chose to pursue her fascination with astronomy despite holding a lousy hand of cards she is dealt to succeed in the field: Male dominated, academically cloistered, barrier-cluttered, dismissive of women.

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Cassandra Bissell, Penny Slusher, Neil Brookshire, Ashley Lanyon and Carmen Roman.

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The cast is led by the steely Cassandra Bissell. The no-nonsense, feisty, strong-willed role of Henrietta Leavitt is right in her wheelhouse. Totally convincing.

She is surrounded by excellence: Ashley Lanyon as sweet, warm-souled sister Margaret, Carmen Roman as earthy, common-sense colleague Willamina, Neil Brookshire as wannabe scholar/wannabe lover Peter and Penny Slusher as sharp-minded and courageous suffragette colleague Annie.

The suffragette element underlines unfairness in society of the time.

The time period is also represented by women's fashion, which is finely crafted as says something about and for each character. At the very end, something happens in everyone's clothing that elevates the production well beyond ordinary.

The set is stark. Light arrays – nine clusters to the left and right, 15 clusters above – are placed in black. Clear plastic or resin chairs and tables are the set pieces for wherever scenes take place. The backdrop is reminiscent of lacework, though with an indefinite pattern; this will be the sky with stars at times.

Moving the set pieces is an art in this production. The effect is a clever idea. By rights, the six stage crew members (who beforehand helped park cars) deserve performance credit for the choreographed, meticulous way in which they glide on and off stage while oh-so-carefully placing and shifting pieces. For the bows, in another distinctive touch, the stagehands present each actor to the audience in a respectful and dignified manner.



Cassandra Bissell and Ashley Lanyon

Henrietta and Margaret are slightly emphasized by a single, quiet note that's akin to a hum. Scene changes come with a few passages of string music. Margaret composes in the story, and that is represented in an original work as though Ashley Lanyon is playing a piano.

The play is funny, too. Willamina is forever teasing Peter for his fumbling, failing forthrightness with Henrietta. The three computing women continually have at myopic males. And this state – where the Congregational family lived as the father served as a minister – is a jolly good source:

Looking up and fanning her arms, Henrietta waxes about humankind's exact place as she asks, "Where are we?"

"In Wisconsin," Margaret says.

Frustrated, Henrietta huffs and specifies her question: "In the universe."

"Still Wisconsin."

Creative: Playwright – Lauren Gunderson; director – Elizabeth Margolius; costume designer – Karin Simonson Kopischke; lighting designer – Stephen Roy White; scenic designer – Jack Magaw; properties designer – Emily Hartig; sound designer – Joe Court; stage manager – Kaitlin Kitzmiller; assistant stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; production manager – Cody Westgaard; scenic artist – Steph Charaska; original music – Christopher Kriz; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey

Cast (in order of appearance): Henrietta – Cassandra Bissell Margaret – Ashley Lanyon Peter – Neil Brookshire Annie – Penny Slusher Willamina – Carmen Roman Running time: Two hours, five minutes Remaining performances: To Sept 1: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Aug. 25 and 4 p.m. Sept. 1

Info: peninsulaplayers.com ***RELATED EVENTS: A post-show chat with actors, designers and the director will be held Aug. 29. Also Aug. 29, a pre-show discussion will be offered by Door County Astronomical Society about Henrietta Swan Leavitt's contributions for measuring the universe.

ALSO: The public TV documentary "Breakthrough: The Ideas That Changed the World: The Telescope" includes details of Henrietta Leavitt's research at the Harvard Observatory. The illuminating episode can be viewed online: <https://wptschedule.org/series/11163/Breakthrough-The-Ideas-That-Changed-the-World/>.

NEXT: "George Washington's Teeth" by Mark St. Germain, Sept. 4-Oct. 20